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**Growth in the Promised Land:
A Reading of *Mona in the Promised Land*
as an American Initiation Story**

成长在希望之乡:
解读作为成长小说的《梦娜在希望之乡》

黄漫

指导教师姓名: 张龙海 教授

专业名称: 英语语言文学

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Synopsis

Lillian Jen, who writes under the name Gish Jen, is one of the most prominent Chinese American writers. *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), Jen's second novel after the publication of her first novel *Typical American* in 1991, tells the story of Mona, a second generation Chinese American girl, growing up in the multicultural land of America.

Initiation into adulthood is an inevitable stage in one's life. As a cultural phenomenon commonly existing in human life as well as the significant experience for an individual, initiation has been an eternal theme in literature. Initiation Story is a novel that has a theme of narrating the course of one's growing-up; it tells the experiences of the characters; through the narrative about one or more characters' experiences of growing-up, it reflects the course of changing from immaturity to maturity in mind and psychology of the characters. Initiation Story as a literary genre has its root in German literature, and is widely accepted and well developed in the literary field all over the world. In American literature, Initiation Story also possesses a significant position.

This thesis interprets *Mona in the Promised Land* from the perspective of Initiation Story. The novel inherits the archetypal experiences of Initiation Story in terms of structure, characters, as well as the arrangement of plots. In other words, the novel possesses the traditional characteristics of Initiation Story. However, in terms of initiation theme, *Mona in the Promised Land* has its own characteristics. Since the growing-up of minority adolescents is much more complicated than others, to Mona, a minority girl growing up in the multicultural land of America, her greatest puzzlement in the process of her growing-up is how to find herself a place in society and a sense of belongingness. Therefore, the initiation theme of *Mona in the Promised Land* is embodied by Mona's struggle for a fitting identity. After a series of clashes and difficulties, Mona becomes psychologically and mentally mature. Having gained a better understanding of different cultures and the different relationships among different ethnic groups in American society, Mona finally finds herself a fitting identity --- a Chinese Jewish American. Besides, she achieves her independence and

individuality --- not only as a daughter of her mother, but a person of her own. The historical background of Mona's growing-up is the late 1960s to the early 1970s, when the notion of "multiculturalism" emerged in American society. So the initiation theme of *Mona in the Promised Land* possesses Zeitgeist, delivering the message of multiculturalism. The experiences of Mona and her initiation companions pursuing a fitting cultural identity during the process of their growing-up shows the fluidity of identity, which becomes the author's manifesto to challenge the rigidified notion of ethnicity of the Melting Pot concept. However, during Mona's growing-up, she still encounters different kinds of racial discrimination, the existence of which reveals that multiculturalism in American society is far from an achieved state of affairs. In brief, *Mona in the Promised Land* is a typical American initiation story which reflects the growth of minority adolescents in the multicultural land of America and whose initiation theme delivers the message of time spirit --- multiculturalism.

Key Words: initiation; archetype; identity; multiculturalism

摘要

《梦娜在希望之乡》（1996）是著名美籍华裔女作家任碧莲（笔名吉什·任）继《典型的美国人》（1991）后出版的第二部小说。它讲述的是青少年女主人公——第二代华裔女孩梦娜在多元文化的国度里成长的故事。

成长，是人生的一个必经阶段，是人类生活中一种普遍存在的文化现象和人类个体生命的重要体验，因此成为一个永恒的文学主题。成长小说就是以叙述人物成长过程为主题的小说，它通过对一个人或几个人成长经历的叙事，反映出人物思想和心理从幼稚走向成熟的变化过程。成长小说作为一种文学体裁最早起源于德国，而且很快被世界各国文学所广泛接受并加以发展，在美国文学中也占有重要的地位。

本文从成长小说的角度解读《梦娜在希望之乡》。小说在叙事结构，人物设置，以及情节安排上沿袭了成长小说的原型经验，体现出成长小说的传统特征。然而，《梦娜在希望之乡》在成长主题的表现方面却有自己的特点。少数族裔青少年的成长总是比其他青少年复杂与特殊，作为第二代华裔的梦娜，在她成长过程中最大的困惑是文化身份的认同与归属，因此，《梦娜在希望之乡》的成长主题主要体现于梦娜对文化身份的寻求。在几经波折之后，梦娜在心理上和思想上成熟起来了，她对美国社会各种文化与各个族裔间的关系有了新的理解，找到了适合自己的文化身份——一个华裔犹太教美国人；另外，她还实现了自己个人的独立自主——不再只是母亲的女儿，而是成为一个“人”。梦娜成长于多元文化主义兴起的上世纪60、70年代，该小说的成长主题具有浓厚的时代特色，传达了多元文化的信息。梦娜以及她的成长伙伴们在成长过程中追寻文化身份的个人体验体现了族裔身份的流动性，成为了作者挑战美国大熔炉文化中僵化的族裔概念的宣言，然而梦娜在成长过程中经历的各种种族歧视也反映了多元文化主义在美国仍不完善的现实状况。简言之，《梦娜在希望之乡》是一部反映美国少数族裔青少年成长的具有多元文化主义色彩的成长小说。

关键词：成长；原型；身份认同；多元文化主义

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Introduction

Gish Jen (1955-) was born in Yonkers and grew up in Scarsdale, New York. She is one of the most prominent Chinese American writers. As a second generation Chinese American living in a multicultural society, Gish Jen aims at full participation in American life and reveals in her writing a strong desire to construct her own definition of American. Up to now, Jen has published three novels *Typical American* (1991), *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), and *The Love Wife* (2004). In addition, her short-story collection called *Who's Irish?* came out in 1999. Jen's works focus on immigration, American dream, cultural identity, intergenerational conflicts, assimilation, clashes of family members, and occasional tensions with other ethnic communities.

Mona in the Promised Land is Jen's second novel and also a *New York Times* notable book. As a sequel to *Typical American*, it continues to tell the story of the Chang family. However, instead of focusing on Ralph Chang, the Chinese immigrant of the late 1950s, *Mona in the Promised Land* provides a close-up of the life of Mona Chang, the second-generation (first generation American-born) daughter of the immigrant family. In other words, the novel portrays the growing-up of a Chinese girl in the multicultural land of America.

The thesis intends to analyze *Mona in the Promised Land* from the perspective of Initiation Story. It tries to explore how the novel manages to use the specific literary genre, Initiation Story, to show the growing progress of the heroine. Meanwhile, this thesis also briefly explores the peculiarity of the novel in terms of the initiation theme. Based on what mentioned above, the paper is divided into four parts:

Chapter One gives an introduction to the background information of the writer and the literary genre Initiation Story. The first part of the chapter is about Gish Jen and her literary career, with a summery of *Mona in the Promised Land* and some relevant critical reviews. The second part of the chapter is about the origin, definition, and characteristics of Initiation Story. According to the characteristics, *Mona in the Promised Land* is defined as an initiation story.

Chapter Two gives a more detailed genre analysis of *Mona in the Promised Land*

to prove that it is a typical initiation story. First, by exerting Jung's and Frye's archetypal criticism theories, it reveals that its plot pattern is a variant of the basic plot pattern of Initiation Story, which is based on the archetypal model of human beings' growing-up. Second, the author's arrangement of the main characters, the heroine Mona and her initiation guides --- Rabbi Horowitz and Helen, also reveals some experiential archetypes of Initiation Story. What's more, since initiation turning point and epiphany are important parts in Initiation Story, some plots are created by the author to give the heroine Mona the turning point in initiation and the epiphany towards life and self.

Chapter Three concerns the initiation theme of *Mona in the Promised Land*, which is embodied by Mona's struggle for a fitting identity. The first part of the chapter introduces how adolescents form their identity and cultural identity according to Erikson, Marcia, and Phinney's theories. The second part of the chapter deals with Mona's quest for identity, which experiences the three stages Phinney advocates while having its own peculiarity --- more than two cultures influencing Mona's identity formation. And during these three stages of identity search, Mona gradually becomes mature and sophisticated.

Chapter Four explores the peculiarity of the initiation theme of *Mona in the Promised Land*, i.e., delivering the message of multiculturalism. This chapter begins with a brief introduction to American multiculturalism; then an analysis of fluid American identity possessed by Mona and her initiation companions shows that the initiation theme possesses Zeitgeist --- multiculturalism; however, an analysis of racial discrimination that Mona encounters during the process of her growing-up indicates that multiculturalism is not an achieved state of affairs in America.

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